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SUBJECT: Redefining Domestic Violence in VN by Challenging Accepted Cultural Norms

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11. (SBU) Summary: Vietnam's government has taken significant positive steps in recent years to begin to address domestic violence. The National Assembly passed a Law on Domestic Violence in 2007, domestic violence was highlighted for the first time as an area of concern in Vietnam's most recent five-year socioeconomic development plan, and government ministries and Party-affiliated mass organizations have undertaken awareness-raising campaigns throughout the country. Nevertheless, traditional cultural perceptions that "domestic violence is a private family matter" continue to beleaguer these efforts, and the problem remains endemic. In 2007, media reports stated that a woman dies from domestic violence every three days in Vietnam. Local NGO's, working with government/Party authorities and international partners, are battling cultural prejudices, and we are working to help. Embassy Hanoi and ConGen HCMC have supported wide ranging outreach efforts related to domestic violence, including funding a law enforcement training program and speaking programs. End Summary.

GVN and NGO Actions on Domestic Violence

12. (SBU) When discussing the passage of the 2007 Law on Domestic Violence, the female Chairwoman of the National Assembly's Social Affairs Committee speaks frankly of how difficult it was to convince even male National Assembly members that domestic violence should be treated as a crime. Under the law, domestic abuse is categorized into four groups: physical violence, psychological abuse, sexual abuse and economic abuse. Definitions of violent actions, the rights of victims, and penalties for perpetrators are included in the law. The passage of the Law on Domestic Violence was the first step in redefining the problem of domestic violence as a legal issue rather than a private family matter. The law also required this problem to be addressed from the national level to the local level by assigning different government agencies specific roles and responsibilities to ensure the law was implemented effectively. Though there are lingering concerns that the law is weighted too heavily toward family reconciliation, even in an abusive situation, and contains only light administrative punishments for most situations, NGOs remain supportive of the law and use it as a basis for many of their anti-domestic violence campaigns.

13. (SBU) In addition to passing the law, the Government of Vietnam highlighted domestic violence for the first time as an area of concern in Vietnam's most recent five-year socioeconomic development plan (2006-2010), and various government ministries and Party-affiliated mass organizations have undertaken programs throughout the country related to the issue. Training for law enforcement officials focused on defining domestic violence and

developing procedures to handle cases. The Youth Union and Women's Union have held awareness campaigns, provided safe havens, and established support clubs for victims throughout the country.

14. (SBU) Government efforts have also received significant support from NGOs. NGOs have established several networks which meet frequently to share information, establish best practices and coordinate their activities and limited resources. These networks may have as many as 20 member organizations nation-wide, but most member organizations are relatively small, with limited staffing. NGOs have also conducted awareness-raising campaigns, established a domestic violence focused shelter, supported clubs relating to the issue of domestic violence and worked with the government of Vietnam in various training and outreach efforts.

Hardline Attitudes Die Hard

15. (SBU) Despite these many efforts, those working on anti-domestic violence campaigns find it hard to change culturally ingrained attitudes toward domestic violence. The Ministry of

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Public Security (MPS) attributes 53% of divorces in Vietnam to domestic violence. (Comment: This figure, if anything, understates the problem, since many wives endure domestic violence but stay married. End comment.) Hoai Duc, Director of the Institute for Reproductive and Family Health, explained that domestic violence in Vietnam is traditional, tied to the Confucian values that underlie social behavior and norms. Women are seen as the possession of their husbands and have no power in their relationships. Women are expected to be passive and exhibit traditional qualities of "womanhood," which includes preserving peace in the home - no matter the cost. As a result, many women internalize the experience of domestic violence, seeing it as a manifestation of their failure to fulfill their duties in the home. Additionally, in many rural areas, law enforcement officials, commune and district leaders -- along with the general population -- are still not aware of the law's existence or are hesitant to enforce it because they still consider it a family matter.

Embassy Outreach Efforts

16. (SBU) Education and changing cultural perceptions of domestic violence as a private family matter have directed many of Mission Vietnam's activities related to the problem of domestic violence. The U.S. funded a two-year project by the UN Office of Drug and Crime (UNODC) to build the capacity of law enforcement and justice sectors by developing training materials and workshops that would enhance the capacity of officials to effectively identify and respond to cases of domestic violence. After the conference, organizers concluded that national trainers would need to continue to play a central role, as local trainers still lack adequate understanding of the law. Moreover, as UNODC project coordinator Jennie Vittal explained, Vietnam's law on domestic violence does not accord with prevailing cultural attitudes, and trainers might have difficulty conveying the message appropriately.

17. (SBU) As part of an initiative to support the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, Embassy Hanoi also participated in two events. On November 23, the DCM delivered the

keynote speech at the Center for Women and Development's (CWD) "Workshop for Strengthening the Network for Combating Domestic Violence and Supporting Victims." Over 100 provincial government officials and NGO members attended the event. In addition to the speech, Vietnam's principle television station showed clips of an interview with the DCM on the issue. The DCM also appeared on a half-hour feature show on O2 TV discussing domestic violence and other family-life issues. On November 27, the Embassy hosted a roundtable discussion on supporting victims of domestic violence, which featured a ground-breaking mini-series "Breaking the Silence" produced by the UNODC. Panelists included the film's producer and cast members, a Fulbright scholar involved in social work in Hanoi, Vietnamese NGOs concentrating on fighting domestic violence, a representative from the Ministry of Public Security, and a legal aid representative. Five print newspapers and two TV stations covered the event, which was attended by more than 120 university students.

18. (SBU) Comment: Domestic violence continues to be a serious issue in Vietnam, with experts pointing to alcoholism, poverty and lack of legal knowledge as contributory factors. But the root of domestic abuse continues to be culturally accepted gender inequality. Acknowledging this as a core issue, most domestic violence NGO networks have agreed that they need to focus their outreach efforts on men. It is hoped that by drawing men into workshops, training and outreach efforts the fundamental issue of gender equality for women can be addressed and that the conversation concerning domestic violence can be turned from "cultural to criminal." As experts have noted, no culture is monolithic and attitudes in society do change, especially when there is pressure to do so. Embassy Hanoi continues to work with various NGOs on the issue of domestic violence and will use the momentum built from our recent activities to continue to partner with others on addressing this issue of domestic violence and ensuring that men are included as a focus group. End comment.

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19. (U) This cable was coordinated with ConGen HCMC.
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